



# Prologue

## *New Year's Eve*

‘Celeste! I’m here! Quick, quick – only four hours till midnight!’

It’s Hannah, right on time, which is early for her. I’m halfway through applying cat’s-eye liner, a rare and risky manoeuvre for me, so I call ‘Hang on’ as loudly as I can through the edge of my mouth. But Hannah, not hearing me, continues to bang cheerfully on the door until I run out to let her in.

‘You have a key, don’t you?’ I ask, laughing and giving her a hug.

‘Of course I do, but where’s the fun if I just let myself in? Oooh, I love the eye make-up. Asymmetrical! That’s going to be the next trend, I’d say.’

Hannah hangs up her coat, zips up my silver dress and puts the Prosecco and cheesecake she’s brought in the fridge, all in the time it takes me to finish doing my left eye. I’ve bought the cassis liqueur that she likes, so she pours herself a Kir royale and me a glass of plain fizz, moving swiftly as she knows where everything is.

‘Cheers! That really suits you,’ she says when I’m done.

‘I know it’s a bit mad putting on make-up when it’s just us two, but I felt like dressing up.’ I close the eyeliner and put it away carefully in my ‘fancy make-up’ drawer, full of

intimidating implements and palettes; all purchased aspirationally and rarely used.

‘Well, if it’s just us, that’s even more of an occasion. When’s the last time it was just the two of us? I’ve even made a special New Year’s playlist! May I, madam?’

She connects her phone with my speaker; soon ‘Celebration’ by Kool and the Gang is playing and we start to bop around my tiny galley kitchen, from which most of my one-bedroom flat is visible, including the sofa bed where Hannah will sleep later.

It *is* a bit odd to be having a slumber party for New Year’s Eve at the ripe old age of thirty-five. But our friends are all increasingly coupled up and unlikely to want to spend New Year’s Eve at a crowded bar or even at a party. Sibéal and Rishi are exhausted with two children under five; Mel and her boyfriend Pablo are having a cosy evening together. Of course, Hannah is part of a couple herself, but Vikram, her boyfriend, isn’t bothered about New Year’s. So she’s journeyed from their place in Hackney to my flat in Finsbury Park to continue our tradition, unbroken since that first one we shared in Dublin when we were eighteen; we always spend New Year’s Eve together.

It’s fashionable to hate on New Year’s, but Hannah and I both love it with its particular mix of nostalgia and novelty. Hannah loves the dressing up, partying and new beginnings – three of her favourite things. I love the sense of occasion, the chance to say a proper goodbye to the year that’s been, however good or bad. And we’ve always agreed that if Christmas is for family and Valentine’s is for couples, New Year’s should be for friends. I didn’t really expect our tradition to last after Hannah and Vikram got

so serious – but so far it has, which makes me feel a bit guilty tonight.

‘Are you sure Vik doesn’t mind spending the evening alone?’ I ask. ‘He could have come too.’

‘Not at all . . . He knows this is our thing. And he’ll be delighted to have a night in alone to play *Super Mario* in his pants. Anyway.’ She holds out her drink for another toast. ‘Cheers! Happy New Year!’

We both clink, take a sip, and I beam at her while admiring her outfit. She’s also dressed up: her tawny hair is scraped up in an artlessly messy bun and she’s wearing a navy printed jacket with a black-and-red silk camisole peeping out from underneath and no make-up except red lipstick. Wide black trousers and flat shoes that would look like granny slippers on me. Very Hackney, very Hannah.

‘So . . . it’s all going ahead, with the house?’ I ask.

‘It should be.’ She holds up crossed fingers. ‘The whole probate thing has finally concluded, and we’ve signed the paperwork so . . . yep. We need to get a date for the keys, but we’re hoping February.’

In a bizarre accident of family history, Hannah’s boyfriend Vik has inherited a house in Suffolk – not just a house but a literal manor, complete with a pond and resident swan. I can’t imagine Hannah, an urban creature to her bones, really living there. It’s not that I don’t think it will happen – Hannah always does what she says she will. And she and Vik are solid, four years in. I’m just worried that she will miss her countless friends and the urban buzz here, not to mention her Deliveroos and Ubers. Mostly I’m worried about how much I will miss her.

Reading my mind, as ever, she says, ‘It won’t change

anything, Celeste. I mean, it will, but you'll just have to come and stay. We'll have a big house party for next New Year's – it will be like something out of Agatha Christie but without the murder. And I'll come here whenever I need an urban plunge. It'll be great.'

I smile at her, marvelling at how she's got it all worked out. 'Of course you will. It's just . . . how do you know? I mean, how do you know that it's the right thing for both of you?'

She shrugs. 'I don't really. But there's only one way to find out, isn't there? Sometimes you just have to hold your nose and jump.'

I clink my glass against hers. 'Well, here's to the move. I can't wait to see you and Vik – lord and lady of the manor.'

'Thanks, hon. It's going to be a bit of a scramble – I'll just be back from skiing with my mum when I have to pack for the manor move.' She throws her head back and laughs. 'It's a hard life, isn't it?'

'The worst,' I agree. 'Is your mum looking forward to skiing? Has she been before?'

'Nope,' says Hannah. 'I mean . . . am I proud that she's taking up adrenaline sports at the age of sixty-two? Yes. Am I a bit nervous she'll bust her ankle on day two and we'll have to airlift her back to Dublin? Also yes.'

'Well, she's earned the right to take a few risks, hasn't she?' I say. Hannah's mum was successfully treated for breast cancer three years ago.

'She sure has,' Hannah says soberly. 'No, it will be great. I'm looking forward to it.'

'Here's to Dervla,' I say, and we clink glasses – again.

Hannah continues, 'She does love the idea of me and

Vik living in a manor house. Though the number of bedrooms is giving her some ammunition on the whole grandchild thing. “You need to get busy filling those”, etc.’ She rolls her eyes.

‘You’d like that too some day – right?’ I ask, not because I want to pry but to make sure I haven’t misunderstood her feelings on the subject.

‘Sure, some day, but not now. We’ve enough on our plate with the move . . . Ooh, I nearly forgot.’ Hannah digs in her bag. ‘I have a present for you.’

She pulls out a tiny package, exquisitely wrapped, a skill honed during her long stints working in various retail places while building her illustration work on the side. I open it and gasp. It’s a necklace, but not just any necklace; it’s a silver version of her precious golden bee necklace. Bees are Hannah’s personal symbol – she’s always had a thing for them and she has a ton of bee-themed items, from mugs to writing paper.

‘I can see why you like them,’ I said once. ‘They’re sort of like you.’

‘Loud and annoying, you mean?’

I had grinned. ‘Buzzy – and hard-working – and good at networking.’

Now I thank her profusely and put the necklace on, admiring how it looks with my black hair and paper-white skin. To make room for it I start to take off the other necklace that I always wear – the one with the emerald pendant, which I bought for myself after I gave back my engagement ring.

As she watches me take it off, she says, ‘Hey, you can wear them both!’

I look at her, knowing, as ever with Hannah, that she understands the significance of my necklace – a kind of promise to myself that I would make a great life on my own. She nods and continues, ‘Layering. You may have heard of it.’

‘I have . . . but I’ve never really got the hang of it. I can only cope with one necklace at a time. But this is so gorgeous – thank you.’ I feel bad that she spent all this money on me, especially as she’s presumably saving for the house move, but that’s Hannah: generous to a fault and also fairly free with the old credit card.

‘I love that I’m in bee club now. And I love that it’s silver . . . I’ve been paranoid ever since reading that article that said silver is out. As are heels, apparently.’

Hannah rolls her eyes, dismissing the idea of trends, as trendy people often do. ‘Whatever. I suppose, yes, gold and flats are more – modern. But silver is you. You’re silver and heels, and you always will be. Never change, Celeste.’ She gives me a hug.

‘I won’t,’ I tell her, hugging her back. ‘OK, now I have something for you . . .’ I skip the three steps to my bedroom, excited to show her what I have.

Hannah unwraps the small package and then shrieks out loud. ‘Celeste,’ she says, ‘I can’t believe this. Where did you get it?’

‘It was in my old room at home. You know I’ve been meaning to clear it out for donkey’s years . . . anyway, I found it among a whole load of Leaving Cert notes on oxbow lakes.’

It’s a framed photo of the first New Year’s Eve we ever spent together, when we were eighteen: New Year’s Eve,

1999, the Millennium. Me, Hannah and some others in the drawing room of her beautiful old house in Dalkey, County Dublin. What a night. All sorts of people came, we danced till 3 a.m. and then fell asleep in various heaps around the house. Until the next morning, most magical of all, we took a boat out to Dalkey Island and lit a fire there as the sun was rising.

‘I love it. I can’t even remember anyone taking it – who was it?’

‘It might have been your mum,’ I say. ‘Don’t you remember, she came home and you thought she was going to throw everyone out, but she stayed for a drink? Look, there’s Deirdre Fogarty there and John Ryan . . .’

‘Oh, and look, there’s Patrick! We just saw him last week.’

‘Oh yeah.’ This is Hannah’s old family friend, who has just moved to London on a short-term IT contract. He works in Canary Wharf, like Vik, and the two have struck up quite the bromance. ‘How is he?’ I ask.

‘He’s fine. We had dinner with him and his girlfriend Ivana in Seoul Bird recently. She does my head in, to be quite honest. First she was an hour late, then she spent the whole dinner practising her American accent – she’s an actor, don’t you know. I shouldn’t make fun of her, though, she has a drinking problem. God love her, it’s very sad.’ Hannah adds thoughtfully, ‘That reminds me – there’s another Irish guy who’s just joined Vik’s company, very nice. Maybe I should set you two up.’

‘Oh, please no, Hannah. You know I don’t date Irish guys.’

‘Why not?’ she objects, though I’ve told her many times.



‘You know why. They all have drink problems or mammy issues or both. Or else I feel like they could be related to me? I dunno. I just never fancy them. The gene pool is too small, I think.’

‘Celeste! You can’t say things like that!’ But Hannah’s laughing. ‘Irish guys are the best!’

‘Says the girl dating the British guy.’

‘OK, fine. I won’t try setting you up.’ She gazes at the photo again. ‘Look at the state of me. The fake tan, those low-rise jeans – ouch. You look just the same, though. Even the hair – and, look, you’re wearing silver there as well!’

‘God, you’re right,’ I say, startled. I suppose I’m not the greatest fashion innovator.

‘Do you realize, except for that year when I had flu, we’ve kept up our New Year’s thing for – what is it? Oh, God, is it seventeen years? It can’t be!’

We stare at each other in horror. *Seventeen years?* This is like when people ask me when I moved to London; I don’t like how ‘thirteen years ago’ sounds so I’ve started saying ‘around ten years’.

Hannah recovers first. ‘Right,’ she says, ‘do you want to hear my resolutions?’

‘Definitely.’ I love hearing Hannah’s resolutions, in the same way I love reading travel articles about places I will never go to or trends I will never wear. They’re generally lists of new things to do – like ‘Try ombre nail paint’ or ‘Run with the bulls in Pamplona’. Whereas I tend to make the same ones every year, generally along the lines of ‘Lose half a stone’ and ‘Declutter wardrobe’. But she loves hearing mine too, so it’s win-win.

Hannah takes out one of her little doodle-filled Moleskine notebooks in which she always writes her resolutions. She's about to read them out when she's distracted by the music. 'Hey, listen!' she says. 'It's our song.'

And indeed, 'Fairytale of New York' has just started, which is the signal to drop everything and serenade each other. I don't know when this became our New Year's anthem: a song about drunken derelicts who've fallen on hard times and are blaming each other for their woes. But we always cheer when it comes on and belt it at each other in a tuneless duet, with the high point being the line about this year being for me and you. Then the song ends and Hannah hugs me, sighs in happiness and looks at her photo again.

'I hope you made a copy for yourself,' she says.

I wave my hand over towards my desk/dining table, where my copy has pride of place among my framed photos: me and my parents and my younger brother, a few of some old college friends, and some more recent ones of me and Hannah. It's a small collection but that's OK. One thing I've learned in my thirty-five years is that you don't need a huge group of friends: a few good ones – one good one, even – and you're golden. Or silver, as the case may be.

'Say cheese! . . . Happy New Year!' Hannah says, pulling me in beside her for a photo. We smile at the screen, our two faces side by side, silver and gold bees glinting. Not knowing that this will be our last New Year's together, or that Hannah won't be around to see the next one in.



# I

## *Six months later*

You can get used to almost anything. This can be good and bad, of course.

Take this place. I can remember the first time I came to Leadenhall Market, soon after moving to London. I was so charmed by it, with its vaulted ceilings, antique lamps and red-and-gold fluted columns; not even the real Diagon Alley could have felt more magical. Now it's just a convenient place to meet Vik for lunch, at a little place that does sandwiches and coffee. I don't normally take a lunch break like this, but he particularly wanted to meet me, and he's the one person I will always make time for these days.

'Celeste!' There he is, loping along and waving one hand, his cycling helmet clasped in the other. His shorts and T-shirt suggest he's been working from home, which his IT job seems to allow more often than not. It's convenient, but I don't know if it's good for him to spend so much time alone. I notice how thin he's got, and I make a mental note to make sure he has a proper lunch.

'Sorry I'm a bit late.' He gives me a quick kiss on the cheek and sits down opposite me. 'How's things?'

That's another strange thing I've got used to – meeting Vik on a regular basis without Hannah present. We've

leaned on each other so much recently: from the first nightmarish day when Hannah's mother called from their skiing holiday in France, to the funeral in Dublin and the coroner's report. In the initial aftermath, when I met up with him I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that it would be just us two. I was honestly certain that Hannah was about to walk into the room, or that she would text me to tell me she was running late – again. I thought I was going out of my mind until I confided in Vik about it and he told me he was experiencing the same thing.

That initial sense of disbelief has faded, but each month seems to bring a horrible new milestone. Just last week, I went to their place in London Fields to pick up a few of Hannah's things, including a photo album of our walking holiday in Spain and her precious golden bee necklace. Seeing that in the box just broke me all over again. 'Didn't her mum want that?' I asked Vik, who shook his head. I took the 106 bus back home afterwards, cardboard box on my lap. I thought my tears were discreet until a woman opposite me leaned forward and said, 'He's not worth it, love.'

'What's up?' I ask once we've ordered our food. 'You said you had something to tell me.'

'Well. Just a bit of news. I wanted to tell you in person . . .'

I tense, because any news that has to be delivered in person – or over the phone – now makes me nervous. For a mad minute my mind spirals. Vik's ill. Or . . . he's met someone? It's not that, but what he says comes almost as a bigger shock.

'It's about the house.'

‘Oh yes?’ I ask, realizing that by ‘the house’ he means the one in Suffolk that he’s inherited, not the flat in Hackney where he and Hannah lived.

‘I’ve decided I’m going to move there.’

‘You are?’ I try to hide my dismay, with difficulty because this seems like a *terrible* idea. It was one thing for the two of them to move there together but quite another for Vik to live there completely on his own, away from all his friends and family.

‘But I thought the plan was to sell it?’

‘It’s been on the market for three months now, though, with no offers. The feedback seems to be there’s too much work to do. So I’m going to live there while it’s being done . . . I can still work remotely, so that’s a big help.’

‘What about your place here?’

‘I’m going to rent it out.’

‘Oh, I see,’ I say, filled with relief. It sounds as though it’s going to be a temporary project, and before long he should be back where he belongs, a bus ride away in Hackney.

‘It’s just going to be easier to supervise everything on site. And some of it I can do myself.’ He makes a comical face. ‘I was pricing electrical sanding machines this morning.’

‘Really?’ I ask, trying not to show my amazement. I don’t think of Vik as the most practical person ever; I don’t know if he’s ever even put up a shelf or used a drill.

‘Yes, really!’ He laughs. ‘I’m not completely soft-handed, you know.’

‘I know! Well, let me know if you need help with any of it,’ I say. ‘Like, dealing with tenants. Or . . .’ I don’t

conclude my sentence because I can't really think what else I can help with. I'm not exactly going to be much use on the DIY front.

He smiles. 'Thanks, Celeste, but you're a busy lady. I don't think you want to be woken up at three a.m. to fix a leaky roof.'

'Oh, I could be handy with a bucket,' I say valiantly. 'But seriously – let me know if I can help with anything. Packing up, etc. When are you leaving?'

'I'm thinking the first of July.'

'So soon?'

'You'll have to come and visit,' he says. 'The place is really special. It needs a bit of love, but I think it could be beautiful. The garden too. It's a wilderness, but it's gorgeous as well – especially this time of year.'

I nod, not wanting to say that it won't be so nice when winter descends and he's stuck indoors on his own, a ten-minute drive from the nearest village.

'And my grandfather would be pleased,' he adds. 'I hope. It's quite special, you know, the way it came to him. So I do feel some responsibility for making sure the place doesn't tumble to the ground on my watch.'

'Of course.' I only know the gist of the story but it's quite an extraordinary one. The short version is that Vik's late grandfather saved the life of a British officer in Italy during the Second World War and that Vik has inherited the officer's family house as a result. I can see why he feels a sense of family obligation; I just hope he knows what he's getting into.

'There is something else actually, which I was going to run by you . . .'

‘Yes?’ I ask. Vik is a great one for schemes and I’m half expecting him to say he plans to open an alpaca farm or something like that.

‘I was thinking about New Year’s . . .’

I look down, thinking that this will somehow be the most painful celebration of all. Worse than her birthday or Christmas.

‘I was thinking of doing something at the house. A party.’

Another gut punch, as I remember the house party that Hannah planned.

As if he’s reading my mind, Vikram says gently, ‘It’s going to be a rough one. But I thought a few of us could get together and raise a glass to her. What do you think?’

I let out my breath, which I realize I’ve been holding. There’s every reason to say yes; it would obviously make Vik happy, and it would be a way to honour Hannah’s memory. So why does the prospect fill me with dread?

‘But do you think you’ll still be there, Vik?’ I ask. ‘If it’s just a temporary move?’

‘Oh yeah,’ he says, laughing. ‘There’s at least six months’ work there. Easily.’

‘Right.’ I notice that he has managed to eat his sandwich, even though he’s been doing most of the talking. Maybe this bodes well, and the project of doing up the house, and selling it, will give him a much-needed boost or distraction.

‘Thanks for inviting me. It would be nice,’ I say, trying to sound positive. ‘I’ll definitely think about it . . . But it’s a way away, isn’t it?’

‘It is. But you know how people get booked up – and



the time will fly by.’ He shrugs. ‘As much as time can fly by these days.’

‘Oh, Vik,’ I say, putting down my half-eaten sandwich. ‘Won’t you be lonely?’

‘I’m always lonely,’ he says simply. ‘So maybe a change of scene would help. Doing up the house was what she wanted, so . . .’

I nod, feeling a lump in my throat, and squeeze his hand across the table. Part of me almost envies Vik this temporary project, because at least he can feel as if he’s doing something for Hannah. I sometimes wish I were religious, or that she had been, so that I could do a novena, or have Mass said for her, or set off on a pilgrimage, but there’s nothing I can think of that would be appropriate to her memory. There’s the party, of course, but I can’t face that; anyway, it’s a group event, and I’d prefer a solo mission.

We chat about more general things, as we finish our lunch, and then I give him a brief hug before hurrying back to the office. I take the short cut through the back of Leadenhall Market, which is now filled with summer tourists taking photos of the ‘magic shop’ – which is actually an optician’s. I can’t believe that Vik is leaving London. I hadn’t realized how much I’d been leaning on him – more than I have on my family, or Sibéal or any of our other mutual friends. But it’s only temporary, I remind myself. He will come back. Unlike Hannah.

This brutal thought hits me like a sledgehammer, and I have to place a hand on the window ledge of a nearby shop while I catch my breath. Gone, gone, gone. Never coming back. It can’t be true, but somehow it is. There

was a time when this realization would fell me, almost like a panic attack, and at times it made me physically sick. But I'm better able to cope now, and it's only a few minutes before I'm able to stand up and make my way back to the office, looking for all the world like a normal person. I almost envy the Victorians, with their black mourning clothes that showed everyone what they were enduring. Most of my work clothes are dark, of course, but it's not quite the same.

Back in the office, I take the lift fifteen flights to our floor, where I head to one of the meeting rooms to prepare for a call. I'm exhausted from having woken up at 5 a.m., a frequent occurrence these days. I wish I'd thought to grab a coffee on my way back.

'Celeste?' There's a knock at the door; it's Swati, one of the junior analysts. She pushes her glasses nervously up her nose and says, 'I'm doing a Pret run and I just wanted to check if you'd like anything?'

'You're a mind reader.' I reach for my bag and hand her a tenner from my purse. 'Could I please have a flat white – and a brownie? Thanks, Swati.'

'Not at all,' she says and trots off. Swati is amazing: she's able to grasp the big strategic picture, but she's also across all the details – including coffee. I know that my friend Gemma, who manages Swati, is a bit worried that she'll burn out; she certainly works even harder than I did at her age. But I don't have the brain space to worry about her right now, or about anyone but myself and Vik.

As I put back my wallet, I notice my personal diary for the year hiding at the bottom of my bag. It's pretty blank,

unlike my work calendar, which I know is crammed to capacity. I'm a management consultant, which means I do pitches for work, and then hopefully get the work, which means meetings, reports and spreadsheets, then billing, then pitching and off again. I used to find it really rewarding – intense but just challenging enough in the right way – but lately the thrill has faded, and I can't tell if that's because of Hannah or because I've plateaued.

I flick through the remaining months of the year. There's a christening in August and a wedding in September, but otherwise it's not exactly jam-packed. December has my work Christmas party, and my trip home to Dublin for a week. I flip to the thirty-first, get a pencil and write, very lightly, *House party at Vik's?*

But even as I write it, I know that it's not going to happen. I want to support Vik, and I'll do anything I can to help him with the move. But a party at New Year's? No. Maybe some time in the future, but this year, the first New Year's without Hannah, is too soon. Togetherness, emotion, showing it in public: I can't deal with any of that right now.

Though the glass partition, I see Swati heading off down to Pret with Dasha, another junior whom I manage. A bubbly party-going blonde, she's quite different from the solid, serious Swati, but in the last few months they've become joined at the hip. I feel a wistful pang as I see them together, giggling over nothing, in the honeymoon flush of their friendship. And I remember when Hannah and I first became friends, and how a text from her transformed my world, a lifetime ago in 1999 – the worst New Year's of my life, which turned out to be the best.

*New Year's Eve, 1999*

‘Guys, I was wondering. Shouldn’t we be doing something – for the Millennium?’

It was December 1999, and I was sitting with my best friends Bronagh Clarke and Fiona Leahy at our adjoining desks in the front row of the classroom in St Brigid’s, waiting for our first lesson of the day: Maths with Mrs O’Connor. I felt very grown-up as I posed them both the question, as if expecting them to consult their Filofaxes, instead of looking blankly back at me.

New Year’s had never mattered much in my world before, but lately everyone was talking about it, because this was the big one: the Millennium. The headline news was, of course, the impending Y2K crash, which was causing consternation among my friends, all of whom were expecting global computer systems to grind to a halt, ushering in a Mad Max-style era of chaos.

‘I really don’t think it’s wise,’ Bronagh said. ‘Haven’t you been reading the news? The whole world could be falling apart. Aeroplanes falling out of the sky, the whole nine yards. The buses might not even be running.’

‘Well, we could use our bikes,’ I said tentatively. ‘How about a sleepover at my place?’

Fiona, sounding evasive, said, ‘I don’t know. I think it’s

probably wiser if we all stay at home. I want to be with my parents if there are major issues.’

I said nothing but I was disappointed. Something was definitely up with them – they had been acting oddly lately and I’d felt, several times, as if they had changed their topic of conversation when I arrived. I put it down to stress over the Leaving Certificate, which we would all sit the following June and which would decide where we went to university and therefore our entire future – assuming we weren’t all scrabbling around in a post-Y2K apocalypse.

The next morning, I found out the truth. I was sitting on the 46A bus which would take me from my home in Mount Merrion to school in Stephen’s Green, when I received a text on my Nokia phone. I had just got it that year, amid protests from my parents who didn’t see why I needed one. I mostly used it to play Snake. The text was from Bronagh and said: **Heya Fiona. OK so new yrs: c u 8pm 31st at my place? I’ll say it 2 Laura n Roisin but DO NOT tell Celeste.**

It was my first experience of a very twenty-first-century phenomenon: receiving a text that was about you, not for you. Seconds later, I got the equally 2000s follow-up: **SORRY that text not meant 4 u.** I reread both texts ten more times on the way to school, trying to think of a reply that was suitably cutting and dignified all at once. I just couldn’t believe it. Ours wasn’t the only group that was fraying at the edge, but there was also an unspoken agreement that however annoyed people got at each other, we only had six months left together and then we’d all go our separate ways. Surely I wasn’t so awful that they had to dump me ahead of that? But these two texts – and the fact that Bronagh had gone

to the effort of locating the all-caps button for ‘DO NOT tell Celeste’ – told me I was wrong. She had mustered up some caps for her apology, but that was cold comfort at this point.

I delayed going into class until the last minute so I didn’t have to face my so-called friends. But Bronagh and Fiona had obviously decided that some confrontation was needed, and during Maths I received a handwritten note – *Meet us in back fields at break* – which I took as a hopeful sign. We had all been best friends since the third year, and even if things had been a bit rocky recently, surely it could be resolved.

However, it was clear within minutes that this wasn’t going to be a good chat in which we all learned something and hugged it out; this was, though I didn’t know the term then, an exit interview.

‘We’ve just all been really upset by the way you’ve been acting lately. And by some of the things you’ve said,’ Bronagh began, when I was sitting on our usual bench with the two of them on either side of me, arms folded like guards.

‘What things?’ I was honestly baffled.

‘Well, for a start it was really out of order for you to complain about losing weight – when you know how Laura’s been struggling.’

I knew of Laura Hannigan’s struggles to lose five pounds but I honestly couldn’t remember complaining about my own recent stress-induced weight loss. ‘I didn’t!’

‘You asked if you could use the home ec. sewing machine to alter your uniform skirt in front of her – did you not? And then you said why?’

‘Oh yeah. But Miss Cotter asked me why! I didn’t know Laura was listening!’

‘And you’ve generally been quite a know-it-all. For example, telling us we’re all losers for wanting to go to college in Dublin.’

‘What? But I didn’t mean it that way, I just meant that we should *consider* places outside Dublin. I didn’t mean you guys were losers!’

‘It was implied,’ said Fiona. ‘But the icing on the cake for me – I don’t know about you, Bronagh – was the Y2K lectures. I think our fears are very valid and it didn’t make me feel good to have you just dismiss them.’

‘But I didn’t! I was trying to reassure you! My dad says –’

‘We know what your dad says,’ Bronagh said. ‘You’ve told us about a billion times. I think Y2K is going to be a big deal. I just hope you don’t regret being so –’ she paused to search for the right word – ‘complacent about it.’

I had heard enough. I stood up, and said, ‘So if there really is going to be a global meltdown, why are you planning a sleepover?’

That left them lost for words, and I had a feeling of satisfaction, swiftly followed by shame and remorse. They were right. I was obnoxious, too big for my boots, a know-it-all. I deserved to be cut off. But I couldn’t say that, so instead I mumbled something about how I was late for class and dashed off before they could see the tears in my eyes.

I got through the day somehow, until it was finally time to go home on the bus, thankful for once that I was the only one of my friends who took that particular bus home. I let myself into the door of 31 Clonmore Park, grateful that my parents were still at work and that my younger brother Hugh was at band practice. That was just

another of my afflictions; having a younger brother who was already cooler than me, playing in a band that had actual gigs in pubs he was too young to drink in.

I took off my maroon uniform and got into my track-suit bottoms, curling up on my bed as I contemplated the wreck my life had become. It was all well and good to think that I only had six months left with these girls. Without them to support me through exams and college applications – without friends, in short, and with a public pariah status – it would be a long six months. I wondered if break-ups were this painful, and then decided they couldn't be. If you were dumped by a boy, you were guaranteed endless sympathy and almost star status among your female friends. If your friends dumped you, you were untouchable and rightly so.

I was wondering whether I could actually ask my parents whether I could somehow transfer to another school for the next six months, when I heard the buzz of another text from my phone. I sat up, terrified that it was another text from the girls outlining my crimes.

But it wasn't. It was a text from a new friend I'd made at summer camp, Hannah Golden. *Hi Celeste! What RU doin new years eve? Having a party @ mine - want 2 come? xxxH* I stared at it as if it was a message from outer space, which, considering the social stratosphere Hannah occupied, it could very well have been.

I had met Hannah the previous August, at summer camp in Connemara, in the Gaeltacht – one of the Irish-speaking regions in the west of the country. Irish college, as it was known, was a rite of passage for almost all Irish teens. We



did wholesome activities like basketball and Irish dancing, but the camp's purpose was to teach the Irish language through total immersion. Hannah and I were both quite old to be there – most people stopped at sixteen – but my parents had thought my Irish could do with another top-up, and Hannah wanted to get out of the house.

Our mornings were spent in Irish language lessons at a local school, and we stayed with local families who lived within walking distance, most of them in bungalows spread along the road behind low drystone walls. Hannah and I were in different houses, but we were both *ceannairí* – leaders of our houses – and therefore we met at weekly 'leader meetings'. I socialized mainly with people from my house and the small number from my school, but Hannah was one of those people whose name was known by the whole of the college.

In our second week a major scandal erupted when Hannah was rumoured to have kissed another house leader, Colm O Ríordán, who had a girlfriend back home; typically Hannah was blamed for it and it was the talk of the college. Her friends were standing by her, but there was another large faction all gossiping about her behind her back, as I found out one Friday evening when I was brushing my hair in the girls' toilets during the weekly *ceili* dance.

'Is there no shame on her?' I heard one of the friends, a Mean Girl type, say as she fluffed out her long blonde mane and applied sticky lip gloss. She spoke in Irish as we all did; if you were heard speaking a single sentence of English you got a warning, and a second got you sent home. They continued talking about Hannah in very

unflattering terms. I made a mental note to remember the word she used for shame but also thought the girl could have asked herself the same question; she was supposed to be Hannah's friend.

'*Tusa*,' the other girl said to me, quite rudely I thought – you. 'Are you not a leader? Is there any story at the meetings – about Hannah and Colm?'

I turned to face them. I knew what I wanted to say – 'if I knew I wouldn't tell you' – but in the heat of the moment I couldn't remember the right conditional tense. Instead I said, 'There is no story at all. It's all made upwards.'

I wasn't even sure if that was true, any more than I knew the right word for 'made up', but it didn't matter; I hated that kind of gossip. The girl raised her eyebrows, and muttered, 'Take it easy', before they all filed out, talking under their breath and then laughing loudly.

Minutes later one of the cubicles opened and – just like in a movie – Hannah herself came out. 'Hi,' she said, nodding to me. She didn't look embarrassed, or indignant; she looked as calm and confident as ever, though I was shocked as I realized she must have overheard everything. She wasn't gorgeous exactly, but she was very attractive, with long honey-blond curls and a triangular, almost foxy face.

'Hi!' I replied. I stowed my hairbrush in my trusty Jan-Sport backpack and was walking out, when behind me Hannah said, 'Excuse me? Celeste?'

I turned round, surprised that she knew my name.

Hannah said, 'I'm trying to write a new song for the concert. Would you give me a hand with it?'

'I would,' I said, intrigued and also a little bit flattered.

It was a big challenge to write a new comic song for your house to perform at the end-of-camp concert; if it was any good, it would be passed down and sung by other students for years to come. I wasn't sure what made Hannah think I would be any good at it, but I was happy to give it a try.

On Saturday we all went to the beach after lunch; Hannah came and found me and we went off to sit on a little rise of grass overlooking the breakers. There were teachers there, and I wasn't expected to supervise the students in my house, but I found my eyes straying to them anyway out of habit.

'Do you like being a house leader?' Hannah asked me, following my gaze.

I hesitated, wondering if it was safe to admit that the answer was yes. It was no exaggeration to say that it had been the making of me: transforming me from a shy, mousy fifteen-year-old to a more confident, articulate Celeste. I loved the responsibility – teaching the younger kids the college songs, refereeing squabbles and helping with homesickness. I also loved the sense of being in the know, meeting the other leaders and hearing all the gossip first-hand, sometimes from the teachers themselves.

'I do,' I said. 'Do you not?'

'I used to, long ago, but not now. I had to report on someone last year for speaking English, and she was sent home. It was awful.'

I shivered at the idea. I had never had to do that, but I knew that I would have to if it came to it.

'Why did you come back so?' I asked curiously.

Hannah sighed. ‘I wanted to get out of the house, and this was the only trip that my parents would pay for.’ She added, ‘I’m taking French and Spanish for the Leaving. I thought maybe I could get a summer job in Paris or Madrid. But where did I end up? The Cuan.’ She laughed suddenly, and I joined in.

‘Hm,’ I said. ‘Maybe we could put that in the song.’

‘What do you mean?’

I sang her last words to the tune of an old song, ‘Only You’ by The Flying Pickets. ‘You won’t know it, I’m sure,’ I added, slightly embarrassed since 1980s music was very uncool. I only knew these songs because my older cousins had the original tapes of *Now That’s What I Call Music*, and I had played them over and over while staying at their house in Sligo one summer.

‘Yes, I know it! I have that tape! With “Radio Ga Ga” – and “Girls Just Want to Have Fun”!’ Hannah said. ‘I love it!’

So that was how we became friends. Not only did we discover a shared love of 1980s music, we also found a shared sense of humour, writing a song that we both thought was pure genius. It was set to the tune of ‘Only You’ and was a lament about being stuck in the rainy west of Ireland instead of sunny Europe. The chorus translated as: ‘All I wanted was to go to France/All I wanted was to go to Spain/But where did I end up? The Cuan.’ By the time we’d finished writing the whole thing, we had laughed so hard we could barely speak and we knew that we had a mega hit on our hands.

‘I did kiss him by the way,’ she said casually, as we were packing away our notebooks. ‘But I didn’t know he had a girlfriend.’

‘That’s fine,’ I said, not knowing quite what to say in either language. I added, ‘I’m not a gossip.’

She repeated the word I’d used for gossip – *cúlchainteoir*, literally ‘behind-talker’ – and asked me how you spelled it, before writing it down in her notebook. I noticed that she was left-handed and wrote with a beautiful slanting script. Her notebook was also covered with intricate drawings, flowers and leaves and stars, a cut above the usual doodles that most people did. Something else occurred to me, as I watched her write. I said, ‘He’s the one who has the girlfriend. Why is the blame not all on him?’

Hannah looked at me with an expression that I thought I would best describe as ‘interested’. She looked as if this hadn’t occurred to her – as indeed it had only just occurred to me.

‘Your Irish is very good,’ she said. ‘Are you from Dublin?’

‘Yes, I live in Mount Merrion. But my parents are from Sligo.’ I didn’t bother explaining that my dad was from just over the border in Mayo, knowing that the distinction would be lost on her, like on most Dubliners.

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘I live in Dalkey, so not too far from you. Would you like to meet, when we have returned to Dublin?’

‘Of course,’ I said, though I couldn’t really imagine such a thing happening. But it had. We had met up twice for a mooch around the Stephen’s Green Shopping Centre and now I was staring at a text inviting me to her party.

Hearing my mother’s key in the door, I slipped downstairs, wanting her company and to tell her about the

invitation. She was taking off her smart camel coat and washing her hands thoroughly. Mum taught science in a girls' school, thankfully not mine, and she was fanatical about not catching colds; she hated calling in sick and letting a substitute mess up her carefully laid lesson plans.

I stood for a minute to watch her, dressed in her brass-buttoned navy blazer and jeans, stepping into her Donegal-tweed slippers. One of her students had told me she was one of the most stylish teachers at her school, working a late Princess Diana look with lots of blazers and houndstooth, plus jeans, extremely daring at forty-eight. I felt a rush of affection and ran to give her a hug – something I rarely did any more.

'What's all this, pet?' she asked mildly, as she hugged me back.

I hadn't intended on telling her about the row with the girls, but it all came out and I wiped away a few tears as I told her what had happened. Mum shook her head. 'I've always said that one would buy and sell you,' she pronounced, referring to Bronagh. 'And Fiona, she's as bad. Those tight ponytails. Listen, Celeste. You're about to start a whole new chapter in your life. You'll meet dozens of new friends at university. Leave them to do what they want, and you do what you want. This way you can put in a few more hours on your study plan, and beat them in the long run. You can take New Year's off – we'll watch the TV together, they're showing celebrations all over the world.'

'Well, that's the thing,' I said, and explained about Hannah's party.

'That's probably fine . . . Will her parents be there?'

'I'm not sure,' I said, thinking that from everything I

knew about Hannah and her family, it sounded pretty unlikely.

I showed Mum the invitation on the screen of my phone, first translating it from text speak into English. Looking at her peer dubiously I realized, with a sinking heart, that she and my dad might well say they didn't want me to go. They had never met Hannah and knew nothing about her, except that she lived on Ulverton Road in Dalkey. That was only a few miles as the crow flew, though it would be a bus and DART ride.

'How would you get home? It's such an awkward journey.'

'I'm sure I could stay the night there,' I said. I hadn't asked Hannah about this but I couldn't see her objecting; from what I understood it was mostly just her and her mum, who kept a bohemian open house. Which was very different from my parents. Sometimes I felt that they had used up their last ounce of adventure moving to Dublin in the 1980s. They had faced some terrible times when my dad's travel company went bust and he was out of work for three years. Now they were new citizens of the Celtic Tiger age, with its spiralling house prices and luxuries such as Tropicana orange juice and CK One perfume. My teen years were so different to theirs; it was as if there were three generations between us instead of one. No wonder they wanted to be cautious with me. But Mum also had a fine sense of pride and I knew that the antics of Bronagh and Fiona would have got her back up. She didn't want me to have to go back into school tamely in January saying that I had stayed in on my own, when I could boast about going to a party in my new friend's house.

‘Go to the party, Celeste,’ she said. ‘And I tell you what, you can use my appointment at the Hair Box, on the thirtieth. You don’t want to be going to a New Year’s party looking streelish.’

I smiled at the word; one of those untranslatable ones that meant unkept, loose, messy. ‘Thanks, Mum,’ I said, giving her another hug.

‘Not at all. Put on the kettle there now and tell me. What are you going to wear?’

I did so, feeling madly excited; not just at the party but at the fact that Mum was talking to me more or less the way she would talk to one of her friends. I glanced back at the text, feeling that my real adult life, with college and jobs and independence, was about to begin. I could picture myself, years in the future, striding into a glossy office in a tower building, wearing a business suit and talking into my mobile. And it was all going to start with this party.